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ABSTRACT

The communication department at Western Michigan University has organized its program around a humanistic philosophy of education that places first priority on concerns related to student growth. The department views communication as those processes by which individuals, groups, organizations, and societies develop and function. The understanding and application of these processes is the central concern of the curriculum. Courses that will help students function effectively in whatever jobs they may choose and courses that help in their personal lives are offered. Many interdepartmental relationships have been developed for a variety of programs, including programs in education, health studies, and management. Students are helped to work successfully with a wide range of people and to develop the power to communicate effectively and ethically in personal and professional relationships. (TJ)

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CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND STUDENT NEEDS

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CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND STUDENT NEEDS

I was very honored to be asked by Dr. Goldberg to talk about curriculum development and student needs at Western Michigan University, and I appreciate the opportunity to share some of our philosophy and planning with you today. I don't know how much of what we are doing is applicable to other departments or institutions, since programs must be based on values, and values in our field vary greatly from person to person and department to department. We don't pretend to have found the ideal model, and we are still, and hopefully always will be, in process. We do have a philosophical basis upon which our department's curriculum is built, and we attempt in our direction, planning, and development of curricular and co-curricular programs to implement this philosophy of education and communication.

We have been actively experimenting for the past 10-12 years, and the effects of our attempts may be seen, partially at least, in our enrollments and status in the University.

We are a rather large department with 27 faculty members, over 1,000 majors, an additional 400-500 minors, and about 150 M.A. students in process. One of every 15 students at WMU is majoring or minoring with us; we have the second largest number of majors in the College of Arts and Sciences, and are fourth largest of 52 departments in the entire University. What is also important, both to us and to the administration, is the number of students who declare their major with us as entering students. Again, only one

department out of 19 in our College has more declared majors on entry than we have, indicating that students are coming to Western for our programs. Less than half of our students decide to major or minor with us after they arrive. It is also not because we have large funds available for recruitment and development that we thrive--our operating budget for a department with 27 full-time faculty members is very modest, and we have only one graduate assistantship for our entire Master of Arts degree program.

Our Department is in the College of Arts and Sciences and consists of interpersonal, organizational and mass communication, oral interpretation, and communication education. We do not have theatre, which became a separate department in the College of Fine Arts in 1976, or speech pathology, which became a separate department in 1965 and is housed in the College of Health and Human Services.

Central to our program development has been an underlying humanistic philosophy of education which places our first priority on concerns related to student growth. This philosophy resulted in a policy of self-determination in student programs, with an emphasis on helping each student realize his or her own potential. We eliminated almost all "required" courses, and focused instead on helping students construct programs for themselves. This has had many good consequences, eliminating the stigma attached to required courses, providing an immediate indication through enrollment trends about the health of a given course, and primarily, giving flexibility to genuinely adapt programs to individual students. An additional value has been the increased communication with advisors, faculty

and students concerning courses and programs. Most importantly, it allows the student to develop and exercise his or her own decision-making capabilities, with a concomitant sense of responsibility for those decisions. We are pleased with the results.

Since satisfying student needs is central to our philosophy of education, if not the raison d'etre of an university, we continuously examine both our students and curriculum in terms of what they need and what communication instruction we can provide. In order to be responsive to today's students, our Department has a healthy skepticism for tradition combined with the courage to make some difficult program decisions. For example, we have no courses in British and American public address and no courses in classical rhetoric. We eliminated our program in intercollegiate debate and forensics several years ago as philosophically questionable, educationally unnecessary if not unsound, and pragmatically too expensive for the number of students served. We have few upper-level oral interpretation courses, and our professors of oral interpretation are the first to counsel students about the dangers of specializing in one performance area. While some of these changes have taken time--some major changes may take two years to thoroughly discuss in area and Departmental meetings--they have come about with a minimum of divisiveness and strife within the Department. It is no small accomplishment for a department that was once a leader in debate, probably the last in the nation to have two separate intercollegiate debate coaches and programs, one for men and one for women, to unanimously vote to eliminate intercollegiate debate and

develop co-curricular activities which had student needs as their base. In bringing about change, we were quite aware of the dangers of in-fighting cited by Robert Hall last year, and special efforts were made to retain traditionally useful concepts and courses.[1] While intercollegiate debate and forensics were eliminated, we still teach argumentation and debate classes, primarily for secondary education and pre-law majors. Rather than losing students because we have no debate and forensics program, I believe we have more students attracted to us because our image is not determined by the publicity such activities tend to generate. Our emphasis is on the substantial ways in which communication plays a role in our students' lives, and we feel our students are served better by internships in business and organizations, with involvement in communication activities of a real rather than artificial or contrived nature, and with research which has communication problems as its basis.

Using a humanistic philosophy of communication, we view communication as those processes by which individuals, groups, organizations, and societies develop and function, and the understanding and application of these processes is the central concern of our curriculum. Further, our Department is not preoccupied with limiting or defining our intellectual domain so narrowly that we define out the significant thinking and research from other disciplines that shed light on our own uniqueness.

If we analyze student needs in communication, several important dimensions evolve. At the individual level, communication is the means by which the self-concept is formed, human goals and values are

determined, and an individual's relationship to his physical, as well as social, environment is developed and maintained. Students still ask "Who am I?"; and it is still in symbolic interaction that the answer to that question can be found. With the exception of required courses, which students take because they are required, perhaps this is the question at the heart of all course selection--namely, the search for and development of the self-concept. Few courses in other disciplines deal with the question directly; our courses in interpersonal communication do, and students elect to take them by the hundreds. Here students discover the significant role communication plays in their personal lives, and often they will take more courses in communication for greater development of both the self-concept and for improving communication skills which they see as central to their own existence. Additional courses in intrapersonal and interpersonal communication, listening, personality and communication, nonverbal communication, family communication, as well as others were added in response to this need. Rather than a focus on manipulative strategies to control or influence others, our focus is on the development of relationships based on mutual understanding and respect.

Students want to be able to find satisfying life work when they graduate. Interpersonal communication helps them to make vocational decisions which are more in harmony with their individual needs, and moreover, helps them to function more effectively in whatever job they choose. Non-traditional students want courses that help them in their personal as well as professional lives. Beyond interpersonal communication, many students want courses in leadership,

public speaking, organizational communication theory, group problem solving, public relations, and mass communication courses of various kinds. For those students planning to go into radio or television--and their numbers are legion these days--we offer a thorough program in both theory and practice in mass communication. We also counsel mass media students carefully about the realities of the competative job market, and encourage them to plan their curriculum with some flexibility and breadth. Beyond this, we offer a course in "Careers and Communication" in which we help our students analyze their own personal and educational background in preparation for their job search, teach them how to describe and evaluate their strengths, where to look, how to apply, and how to interview for jobs. Outside speakers from large employment agencies and corporations are invited to talk with the class. The instructor from our Department also chairs the University-wide Career Education Council, which is seeking to coordinate and improve career education at Western Michigan University. We have also invested in a communication resource center where we keep our own communication library and a career resource file, among many other things.

Using student needs as the basis for curriculum development, we have found it useful to establish interdepartmental relationships for many of our programs. Our experience at Western Michigan University fully supports the position developed last year by Sam Becker on a similar panel, that relationships with other departments can result in a rather broad base of support when course and program proposals are presented to committees, or when our viability as a discipline

is questioned.[2] Further, these relationships are essential for providing the integration of student programs that make the most sense.

In communication education, we have been actively involved not just with our own majors and minors, but have worked closely with the College of Education and other departments in the University in developing special programs in communication. Particularly important has been our work with the Education, English, Speech Pathology and Linguistics Departments in developing an Integrated Language Arts Minor Program for elementary education students, in which oral communication is an integral part. A long-standing relationship has been maintained with the Department of Education, Art, Dance and Music in an Integrated Creative Arts Minor Program, in which our course in Creative Drama for Children plays a central role. Our faculty also team teach such courses as "The Nature of Creativity" and "The Language Arts Processes" offered jointly with the College of Education. Again, our concern has been primarily with designing programs that meet student needs, not that fit neat discipline boundaries.

We have also developed a relationship with the College of Health and Human Services in the Health Studies Curriculum, and courses in communication play major roles in two of the three areas of concentration--human behavior and interaction, and planning, organization and leadership skills. Further relationships in Health Communication are being developed. Our graduate courses are used extensively as cognates by other departments, particularly Counseling and Personnel, Educational Leadership, Social Work and

Psychology, as well as others.

We are currently developing screening procedures for the College of Education for assessing the interpersonal and public speaking abilities of secondary education majors, and we are continuously exploring with various units of the College of Business about possible mutually beneficial relationships. Our Organizational Communication specialization in our M.A. program requires cognate work in such departments as Management, Sociology, Educational Leadership, Political Science, or Social Work.

The product and implementation of curriculum development is very much the result of the process by which it developed. While many communication professors know and teach the basis of interpersonal communication, listening, and conflict management, and run exercises in their classes which demonstrate the value of cooperation vs competition, trust vs suspicion, and consensus vs majority rule, we are fortunate in having professors who attempt to practice in their own professional lives what they teach in the classroom. This orientation led to a necessity for much discussion before critical decisions were made, but has fostered a climate in which trust is high and defenses low. New courses can now be introduced quickly and with departmental support. Where trust is low and defenses high, curriculum innovation is difficult, departments are consumed with internal strife, and energies are diverted in conflict that could be utilized in meeting student and professional needs. The atmosphere is one supportive of innovation and experimentation, and because of this, our faculty are willing to spend time planning new courses and

new approaches. The climate is one which supports risk and tolerates failure.

In closing, I have a concern related to the recent "back-to-basics" movement, with an emphasis on skill development in spoken and written communication, and the impact this might have on curriculum development and student needs. This concern is partly based on the tendency in such a movement to focus on standardization and control for uniformity rather than meeting individual needs, partly on the definition of what is meant by "basic", and partly on the means which are frequently employed to achieve standardization. While public speaking plays an important role in any good communication department, often what is considered basic to oral communication is restricted to platform performance. One question I am asked by some units on campus about basic communication courses is, "How many times do the students give speeches?" I am much less frequently asked by professors throughout the University, "Has the student's awareness of the symbolic powers of humans in relationships been developed; how much better do students understand themselves and the role they play in determining their relationships; can they work better with people because of improved empathic abilities; how much genuine self-acceptance and self-confidence is gained based on increased self-understanding; or, how much more ethically, morally, and humanely do students communicate as a result of their communication courses?" Ultimately, what will be the shape of our society if these communication behaviors are successfully implemented in the student's life? While answering these questions is more relevant to student needs in terms of more

satisfying relationships, the ability to work more successfully with a wider range of people, and the power to use symbols more effectively and ethically in personal as well as professional relationships, what is considered "basic" is gradually shifting from interpersonal processes to how to give a polished speech. If our criteria for success are based simply on speech performance and our public image is primarily based on debate and forensic activities, then we run the risk, as Arthur Koestler once observed, of confusing a traveling circus with Plato's academy.[3] While continuing to consider public speaking as an integral part of our program at Western Michigan University, we believe that to remain viable and to continue to develop as a department requires placing our energies and resources at the heart of our students' needs, and to continue to develop courses and programs that address themselves to those needs.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Robert N. Hall, "Redirections for Communication," ACA Bulletin, April, 1978, pp. 37-39.

[2]Samuel Becker, "Innovations in Administration: Using and Being Used by Other Departments", ACA Bulletin, April, 1978, pp. 21-23.

[3]Arthur Koestler, The Art of Creation (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1964), p. 512.